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ABSTRACT

Reviewed are some of the steps taken by Sesame Street staff in developing initial educational television programming for children with retarded development and having mental age of 3 to 5 years old. Three programming objectives are outlined: (1) to make selected elements of Sesame Street's curriculum more comprehensible to mentally retarded (MR) children; (2) to help foster the positive self-image of MR children and their parents; and (3) to help Sesame Street's nonretarded target audience recognize and appreciate the MR child's abilities and be more understanding of his or her limitations. The formative process of the Play to Grow segments is noted to include seminars with special educators, psychologists, producers, researchers, and others; work directly with the target group; development of preliminary guidelines; and continuous review and assessment of the segments produced. (SBH)

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New Avenues of Special Education Resources:
Sesame Street Programing for the Exceptional Child

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Sesame Street has become such an American phenomenon that many of us accept it as a standard part of a child's experiences. Yet, despite this general familiarity with the show, there are two essential features which few people are aware of: 1) the T.V. shows aired are merely the final stage of a very long and complex evolutionary process; and 2) Sesame Street started as and continues to be an experiment in instructional television. Our policy has been to explore innovative educational approaches, to evaluate our success in achieving this goal, and to revise the program according to our findings. What I'd therefore like to do is document some of the steps which we took last season in developing our initial programming for children with retarded mental development and to explain the rationale for our thinking at that time. Later, Barbara will talk about our current ventures in this area as well as possible trends for the future.

As Dana has said, during the 1975-76 broadcast season, the Sesame Street staff produced 23 one to three minute segments designed specifically for children with retarded mental development and having mental ages of 3 - 5 years old. These segments generally presented both retarded and non-retarded children participating in simple physical activities which were based to a large extent upon the "Families Play to Grow" program of the Joseph P. Kennedy, Jr. Foundation.

Although the segments focused primarily upon physical plays, they were also designed to tap a wide range of curriculum goals. For instance,

some segments focused primarily upon modeling physical activities which could be used to facilitate motor coordination. Other segments featured activities which simultaneously stressed cognitive content, such as relational concepts or counting. Still other segments emphasized affective messages, such as pride, cooperation, or entering social groups.

To facilitate use by parents and teachers, these segments were aired during the first 20 minutes of each Wednesday show. A special logo was developed as a further cue to parents and teachers that a special segment would follow. In addition, the segments generally featured Down's Syndrome children, since it was hoped that visually identifiable mentally retarded children would help parents realize that these segments were designed for them and their children.

There are two questions which generally arise when someone becomes familiar with our programming for special children: 1) What prompted our initial interest in this area? and 2) Why did we select the "Families Play to Frow" program as a model?

Our initial interest in exploring the feasibility of developing a core of Sesame Street segments for special children was due largely to letters which we received from parents of mentally retarded children. These parents stated that their children not only enjoyed the show but, also seemed to be learning from it.

A second motivational factor was a desire to make the show's curriculum accessible to the widest range of children possible. Our first attempt to meet the needs of a special audience resulted in the development of our bilingual/bicultural curriculum for Spanish speaking children during Sesame Street's 2nd Season. We later began to incorporate segments starring performers from the Little Theatre of the Deaf. Hence, as we began to receive anecdotal information of the successes made by mentally retarded children who watched the show regularly, we began to view developing programming for this population of children as a viable possibility as well.

Our objective for developing programming for children with retarded mental development was threefold:

- 1) To make selected elements of Sesame Street's curriculum more comprehensible to mentally retarded children;
- 2) To help foster the positive self-image of mentally retarded children and their parents;
- 3) To help Sesame Street's non-retarded target audience recognize and appreciate the mentally retarded child's abilities and be more understanding of his or her limitations.

This attempt to introduce preschoolers to the diversity within the human condition is a general underlying objective of Sesame Street.

We selected the Kennedy Foundation's "Families Play to Grow" program as a model because we felt it would give us a framework within which to work. As many of you may know, the Play to Grow program seeks to foster the motor, cognitive and affective development of mentally retarded children through the medium of physical play. In addition to improving motor coordination, self-image and social development of mentally retarded children, it also provides them with a vehicle for interacting with non-retarded peers or family members. We therefore felt that the Play to Grow format provided an excellent opportunity to address some of the needs of mentally retarded children, as well as expose our non-retarded viewers to positive models of mentally retarded children who play as they do and who meet with success and failure as they do.

Once the decision was made to develop programming for children with retarded mental development, we found ourselves faced with several fundamental considerations:

- 1) Within the broad spectrum of mental retardation, what target group would these segments be directed to and what label, if any, should we use to describe this group? (For those of us new to the field of special education, the distinction between mental retardation, mental disabled, and other terms common to the field was not always clear.)
2. What kinds of Play to Grow activities lent themselves to television treatment?

3. To what extent would we need to expand our curriculum?
4. Were there any curriculum areas which would be equally beneficial to mentally retarded viewers, as well as our regular target audience? Although we were interested in creating some segments for MR children, we did not want to abrogate our responsibility to our original target group - i.e., the low income non-handicapped 3 - 5 yr. old.
5. Were there any goals within our existing curriculum which coincided with the Play to Grow approach?
6. Last, but foremost, could we present this topic without inadvertently being condescending or misrepresenting mental retardation and thereby perpetuate, rather than reduce the public's misconceptions about mentally retarded children?

In order to resolve these problems, we followed the same formative research approach which has proven successful in developing all other aspects of the show.

Sesame Street is based upon the premise that educational television should be tailored to meet the needs of its target audience. To achieve this objective, one of the Workshop's unique features has been to merge the academic expertise of educators with the creative genius of television producers. Therefore, in addition to the people who write and produce Sesame Street, there is also a full-time research staff. Research's primary

function is to serve as a liason between production and our target audience, to also serve as a liason between production and the academic community.

The CTW operational model, as this formative process is commonly referred to, consists of several sequential stages. For instance, in developing our Play to Grow segments, we first convened seminars with special educators, psychologists, producers, researchers, and others to discuss the feasibility of the project. In fact, it was these brainstorming sessions which helped us to make initial program decisions, such as specifically defining our new target audience to be mentally retarded children with developmental ages of 3 - 5 years old. We also began to delineate existing formats and curriculum areas into three categories: 1) those which seemed equally appropriate for both our mentally retarded and non-retarded viewers; 2) those which needed further revision; and 3) those which seemed totally inappropriate for our new target audience.

During the second phase, the research division began to work directly with the target group of mentally retarded children to familiarize ourselves with their interests and competences in some of the physical activities and cognitive goals being considered. Some researchers visited schools in the New York area which have special education programs; another visited a school in St. Louis to observe a special demonstration of Play to Grow activities; while still another attended the 1975 Special Olympics in Michigan. In general, working directly with our target group of mentally

retarded children enabled us to test some of the suggestions generated during the seminars.

Based upon this initial data and our consultants' advice, the research staff began to develop some preliminary guidelines for production. These Writers' Notebook suggestions consist of specific programming strategies designed to nudge the creative genius of the writers and producers. For example, production was advised to develop segments which were slow-paced and visually sparse in order to eliminate distracting elements. They were also warned to avoid segments which contained an overload of verbal dialogue or utilized abstract animation.

Repetition and music, on the other hand, were considered to be useful teaching devices. Similarly, modeling positive social reinforcement by openly displaying affection towards the mentally retarded children on the set was also recommended.

With the help of the Writers' Notebook and with continuing research guidance and feedback, writers and producers launched the next stage of program development: the actual writing and production of the special segments which were to be aired.

The final stage of program development involves the continuous review and assessment of the segments which have been produced. Only by learning of the extent to which both mentally retarded and non-retarded viewers enjoy these segments and comprehend their curriculum goals can producers and writers improve upon those techniques which have been successful and revise or delete those whose have not. Research therefore contracted two

studies which were designed to answer questions concerning what attempts, if any, should be made in developing special segments for subsequent seasons. The objective of the first study, conducted by Barbara Kolucki, was to develop a taxonomy for categorizing the critical production features and curriculum tasks which comprised the Play to Grow segments. The second study, conducted with the assistance of Dana Ardi, was designed to provide a preliminary assessment of the extent to which we had achieved our objectives. Dana will give you the details of this study shortly.

Before showing you a sample of some of the Play to Grow segments which we developed last season, I'd like to conclude by saying that for those of us who are novice in the field of special education, developing programming for children with retarded mental development has been one of the most demanding, and sometimes even frustrating endeavors we have ever undertaken - particularly since we have had no precedents to follow. Yet, each time as we reflect upon the challenge of overcoming our own stereotypes of mental retardation in addition to creating special program segments, both the research and production staffs feel that without a doubt, programming for mentally retarded children has been one of the most rewarding and invaluable experiences we have ever had. We look forward to expanding and improving future productions in this area.

Let's now view a sample of these segments. The run-down sheet in your packet lists the names of the segments and the corresponding curriculum objectives. Segments 4 & 5 should be noted particularly because they are two experimental productions of the same material. They represent a direct reflection of our attempt to alter our production approaches according to feedback from consultants and/or research findings.